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[Home](#) > [Archives](#) > [Stories from Date](#) > [Achived Story](#)**September 14, 2001****REFUGE MANAGER A LIKELY HIJACK HERO**

By BARBARA BEAL-DN News Editor

Those who knew him feel the refuge manager for the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge who died in the crash of one of four jetliners hijacked in Tuesday's terrorist attacks might well have been the leader in the attempt to take back the plane.

Richard J. Guadagno, 38, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife employee, was on United Airlines Flight 93 from Newark, N.J., when the San Francisco-bound plane slammed into the ground outside Pittsburgh, Penn. He was supposed return to work Wednesday after a two-week vacation visiting his parents in New Jersey and his sister in Vermont.

James Smith, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service project manager at the Red Bluff office, said Guadagno was another project leader. "I did know him, not very well. He was at a number of ecoteam meetings."

Smith said he did know other people who knew Guadagno well. They thought Guadagno, who had law enforcement training, would have been likely to lead the effort to take back the plane from the terrorists.

"They think that partly because of the law enforcement training and partly because he was a no-nonsense type of person, direct and assertive," Smith said. "A lot of people felt he wouldn't sit there quietly and let them take control.

"He was a project leader."

Guadagno had been manager of the refuge for a year and a half.

Refuge Supervisor Dave Paullin recalled a conversation with Guadagno's father.

"I'm willing to bet my life that Rich would not have stood by and watched those people hijack that plane," Paullin recalled Jerry Guadagno saying.

Cell phone calls from Flight 93 seem to indicate that passengers may have tried to overcome the hijackers. The plane almost certainly did not reach its intended target, which may have been the White House.

"A group of us are going to do something," passenger Thomas E. Burnett

Jr., 38, told his wife in a cell-phone call from the airplane before its crash.

Guadagno was a law enforcement officer trained through a federal program that also trains National Park Service Police.

"In addition to his many successes addressing refuge management issues, he was also the consummate refuge law enforcement officer," said Marshall Jones, Fish and Wildlife Service acting director. "He never lacked the courage to do the right thing."

Jimmy Smith, Humboldt County 1st District Supervisor, said Guadagno's loss strikes home. Smith has worked with Guadagno in regional land management planning groups.

"We're really saddened and we're going to miss his enthusiasm," Smith said.

Raul Ruiz, a friend and neighbor of Guadagno's, described him as "really nice, friendly and really interested in the area."

Ruiz learned of Guadagno's death when a colleague of Guadagno's girlfriend called him with United Airlines' confirmation that he was on board.

"It hits home," Ruiz said.

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